

LENDING A HAND

Student volunteers give it up for a good cause

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LAST SUMMER, WHEN YOU ROLLED OFF THE COUCH just before your mom yelled for you to take out the garbage, you didn't exactly volunteer to do the chore. But surely you did something for *someone*, like candy stripe or scoop soup at the shelter. No? Then you — the community service phobe — were the oddball, the sloth among servers of the summer of '96.

In 1996, more collegians than ever flooded the community service sector. The 1996 freshman survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA reports that about 72 percent of freshmen performed volunteer work in the previous year — the highest proportion since the study began in the '60s. And organizations like the Peace Corps and Habitat for Humanity posted record involvement rates.

"Participation is on the upswing," says Sonja Lewis, the director of campus chapters and youth programs for Habitat International. "Each year we've done our Collegiate Challenge program, we've grown by about 1,000 participants. Students are motivated and want to be a part of what's going on."

Generation Next

Are today's 20-somethings really morphing from a sloppy, mooching, video game-obsessed culture to a bunch of mini Mother Teresas?

Peace Corps director Mark Gearan says the GenX slacker label is faulty to begin with. He'd rather call it "Generation Next."

"[This] generation is looking to prepare our country for the future and for ways they can make a difference," Gearan says.

Gearan isn't alone in his perception. New programs pop up yearly to make role models out of college students. Nike Corp.'s P.L.A.Y. Corps (Participate in the Lives of America's Youth) debuted last year.

Program coordinator Eric Gabrielson says starting P.L.A.Y. was an obvious choice. "College students are excellent role models for kids. A lot of [students] want to do it but don't know how."

P.L.A.Y. offers one-time \$500 scholarships to students as an incentive to coach kids' sports teams. Last year, 71 students participated; all plan to return for a second season.

Megan Evans, a U. of Pennsylvania sophomore, became a P.L.A.Y. coach to pass on what she learned

from sports. "I had a coach who invested time in me and made sure I understood that I should play because it was fun, and I love it."

It sounds like Evans got her wish as she chatters away about her basketball team hours before it plays its rivals in the double-elimination championship. "We won the last game against them in the last second. It was so cool. Seeing the emotion in the girls sparks something in me — remembering how I felt and seeing how important the game is in their lives."

Simple, short-term volunteer experience can be just as rewarding, says junior Kim Mowery, who took a year off from Brown U. to serve as the national director of Sierra Student Coalition, the student arm of the Sierra Club. "Whether it's mentoring kids or planting trees, people can directly do and see that they're making a difference. Volunteer work gives people instant gratification."

The payoff

The only thing that was instant about Princeton U. junior Christoph Lee's decision to spend last summer volunteering was his realization that he'd probably land himself in debt. "It sounds really cheesy, but I could have made a couple thousand dollars working over the summer, but it didn't appeal to me. I wanted to help others."

Although Lee was able to get work-study compensation for his work at Grace Hill Neighborhood Services in St. Louis, he took a loss financially. But he says what he learned was worth it. After completing his stint, he decided to put off applying to medical school and work for a nonprofit organization instead. It was a bold step, but a life-saving experience at Grace Hill transformed him.

"One family came into the clinic three times because the son had a respiratory condition. They didn't speak English, but I was able to communicate between them and the doctor in Spanish," Lee says. "That was the one moment I became really passionate. We got the kid to the doctor. By then, the family knew me by name, and the single thank-you and smile from the kid made my summer."

Big volunteer contributions aren't always made one-on-one. Oregon State U. senior John Glass raised more than \$4,000 for PUSH (People Understanding the Severely Handicapped) in order to qualify for PUSH's Journey of Hope this summer.

He hasn't met any of the beneficiaries yet, but he will. Passing off the cash was only half the muscle Glass put into the Journey. The 60 qualifiers will meet in San Francisco in June before they bicycle 75 miles daily for 63 days to get to Washington, D.C., and will visit hospitals and community centers along the way.

Deciding to devote his summer was cake. "It doesn't take much to show a child a little attention for one day. That's not back-breaking."

War stories

Volunteers insist that the most intense rewards spring from threatening situations. LaSalle U., Pa., sophomore and P.L.A.Y. soccer coach Michael Waldron's challenge began when he found out he'd be coaching in a high-crime section of the city.

"We coached in the middle of a war zone. I'm not going to lie to you. A lot of these kids were minus a role model," Waldron says. "I was real nervous — real nervous. I had no idea what I was getting into."

Waldron taught the kids more than soccer. "We would sit down and have 'life sessions.' We'd talk about school and staying out of trouble. [We told] them if they get their popularity through sports, people won't mess with them."

Although Lee raves about his experience, he, too, got off to a bumpy start. "I went through some really rough times at the beginning because of the commute — an hour and a half each way by bus. Then I almost got mugged. After I hitched a ride home with a friend and got into a bad car accident, my parents sent me a plane ticket

home. But out of pure anger and determination to make something of my summer, I stayed. I'm definitely happy I stayed."

Melissa Grego will volunteer to do anything, as long as someone else agrees to pay off her credit card.

Get on the ball

Volunteering may make you feel like a million bucks, but you definitely won't be earning that much. So if you don't want to report to the receiving end of the soup line, check out these resources. They can translate into affordable meals and cheap digs while you're changing the world.

- **The Contact Directory to Nonprofits on the Web:** <http://www.contact.org/dir.htm>
- **AmeriCorps:** (800) 942-2677 or <http://www.cns.gov>
- **Expedition Research:** <http://www.expeditionresearch.org>
- **Grace Hill:** (314) 539-9526
- **Habitat for Humanity International:** If no campus chapter or local affiliate exists, call (800) 422-4828
- **Operation Crossroads:** (212) 870-2106
- **Peace Corps:** (800) 424-8580 or <http://www.peacecorps.gov>
- **P.L.A.Y.:** (800) 929-PLAY
- **Sierra Student Coalition:** If no campus chapter exists, call (401) 861-6012 or e-mail ssc-info@ssc.org



P.L.A.Y. ball!



The house that volunteers built.